

A NEW FRONTIER: KENNEDY AND THE WORLD

If Eisenhower delivered an ominously grave farewell address, his successor, John F. Kennedy, stirred the nation with an impassioned plea for public service for a national common purpose. Appearing vigorous, energetic, and youthful, his presidency came to represent a young generation of liberals eager to tackle the challenges of their time—the Cold War and anti-colonialism abroad, and civil rights and economic opportunity at home. The image of Kennedy’s presidency would prove far more lasting in public memory than the actual work of the man himself.

THE RISE OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

John F. “Jack” Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917, into a wealthy and powerful political family in Massachusetts. A moderately successful student at a variety of private schools in Massachusetts and New York, Kennedy faced his first emergency health crisis at seventeen when doctors had to hospitalize him for a serious bout of colitis. Although ill health and hospitalizations continued to plague Kennedy, he attended Harvard, graduating in 1940, after writing an honor’s thesis that criticized the British government’s isolationism while Germany built up its forces before WWII. Kennedy strongly supported U.S. intervention in World War II. With the help of his father’s friend, Kennedy got accepted to the U.S. Naval Reserves despite his gastric and lower back problems and ill health. Kennedy served in the navy and began his command of a Motor Torpedo Squadron in the Pacific in 1943. In August of 1943, his boat was rammed and sunk by a Japanese vessel. Kennedy led his crew to a safe island and later that year rescued about fifty stranded marines in a gunboat operation, but service-related back injuries forced him out of the service before war’s end.

Back in the United States, Kennedy entered politics with his father’s help. Along with Richard M. Nixon and Joseph McCarthy, he became one of several veterans to win seats in Congress in the midterm election of 1946. Kennedy quickly became a typical Cold War Democrat: supported public housing and unions but also the forced registration of communists. In 1952, Kennedy won a seat in the U.S. Senate, and following his reelection in 1958, he began to plan his presidential race.¹⁹

Nixon vs. Kennedy

Republicans entered the presidential race of 1960 with a strong candidate in Eisenhower’s vice president—Richard



The second of four televised debates between John F. Kennedy (left) and Richard Nixon (right) leading up to the 1960 election.

Nixon. A seasoned politician with a history of red-baiting his opponents in previous elections, Nixon now campaigned as an experienced, world-savvy statesman, based on his years as vice president. Kennedy won the Democratic nomination and quickly selected Senate majority leader Lyndon B. Johnson—his closest primary competitor—as his vice-presidential running mate.

Kennedy’s campaign focused on foreign affairs and the Cold War, charging Eisenhower and Nixon with allowing a missile gap with the Soviet Union that, according to Kennedy, damaged the nation’s reputation and prestige (even though Kennedy knew that no missile gap existed). He also criticized the Eisenhower administration for permitting the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Cuba in 1959 under the leadership of the young and charismatic Fidel Castro. In a tight national competition, the decisive moment was probably the first-ever televised [presidential-candidate debate](#). Kennedy, who wisely relaxed that day, looked healthy and seemed confident and calm, while Nixon, who campaigned all day and refused to wear TV make-up, looked pale and stressed. Americans who listened on the radio told pollsters that they thought Nixon won the debate, but the larger TV audience thought that Kennedy won—a testament to Kennedy’s good looks and calm demeanor. In the final vote, Kennedy secured a comfortable margin in the Electoral College with 303 votes to 219, but his edge over Nixon in the popular vote was a razor-thin 118,574 votes out of more than 68 million cast. Considering widespread reports of election fraud in Texas and Chicago and the significant financial influence of his father, Kennedy’s victory may well have been due the efforts of electoral officials rather than his appeal with voters.²⁰



arbitrary sizing of legislative districts, requiring all voter districts to be equal in population size. Affirming the principle of one-person, one-vote significantly raised the number of representatives of voters in urban counties. Previously, urban areas often had the same electoral weight as rural counties, despite urban areas' much greater population.

In addition, the court reinforced the separation of church and state in public institutions. In **Engle v. Vitale** (1962) the justices found that prayer was unconstitutional in public education and public institutions.

FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO BLACK POWER

The Civil Rights Movement had its origins in the South where segregation, voter disfranchisement, and the violence and intimidation of the Klan and lynch-mobs were prevalent. The desegregation of buses, lunch-counters, schools, and colleges was significant, but did not address all inequalities. Nor did access to the voting booth necessarily make black communities a priority in state politics or make black neighborhoods safer. Problems like insufficient housing and jobs affected African Americans throughout the country, including in the north, and especially in cities. These persistent problems caused the movement to expand from a campaign for rights to a call for power.

THE LIMITS OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

Photographs in magazines and images on television had helped amplify Martin Luther King Jr.'s strategy of nonviolent resistance and delivered shocking images of white bigotry and police violence across the South. The dignity and endurance of protesters, however, concealed the tremendous personal toll this strategy took on activists who endured threats, beatings, and other forms of terror. The murders of activists and the horrific violence that rained on peaceful marchers in Alabama in 1965 caused many people in the movement to ask whether the victories of nonviolent protests came at the expense of the protesters.

The Mississippi Freedom Summer

Since 1961, the civil rights organizations SNCC and CORE had been organizing voter registration drives in Mississippi, where at the beginning of the decade only about six percent of eligible African Americans had been registered to vote. The campaign culminated in the Mississippi **Freedom Summer** in 1964, when thousands of student volunteers,



Freedom Summer activists sing before leaving training sessions at Western College for Women in Oxford, OH, to travel to Mississippi in June of 1964.

Photo Credit: Ted Polunbaum Collection / Newseum

many from northern universities, traveled south to help register African Americans to vote. The involvement of white northern college students drew extra media attention, and the students in turn offered additional assistance to Mississippi children in about thirty freedom schools across the state. However, the Freedom Summer campaign became the target of white southern violence. Local authorities arrested more than a thousand volunteers, white mobs and police beat up over eighty participants, and thirty-seven black churches and thirty businesses were firebombed.

On June 21, 1964, three civil rights activists—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—were stopped by local deputies and later killed by the officer's fellow Klansmen. The event drew national attention and sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement, specifically for the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a law that dealt with the very inequities that Freedom Summer was addressing. However, many African Americans also felt that the widespread attention to the murders was because two of the victims (Goodman and Schwerner) were white and from the northeast. In the past, African-American victims of southern terrorism had often been ignored.⁶¹

Dead End in Selma

The heavy price civil rights activists had to pay also became apparent in Alabama during the Selma to Montgomery March. Although Selma was half African American, only one percent of voters were registered to vote, and as a result African Americans also did not appear on juries. After months of protest, on March 7, 1965, SNCC leader John Lewis attempted to lead a march of six hundred protesters from Selma to the state capital Montgomery.

